The status of Serena and the Stilicho diptych

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One of the best known (and best preserved) of late-antique ivories is what is generally known as the Stilicho diptych, kept in the tesoro of the cathedral at Monza. It represents a military man with a spear and shield on one panel, and, on the other, a high-ranking woman holding a flower above the head of a small boy, not more than 10 years old; he stands between them wearing a *chlamys* and holding the codicils of office in his left hand (fig. 1). Ever since the basic article by C. Jullian more than 130 years ago,[1] it has been generally accepted that the only candidates who fit this description are the western *magister utriusque militiae* Stilicho (d. 408), his wife Serena, the niece and (according to Claudian) adoptive daughter of Theodosius I, and their son Eucherius, appointed to the office of *tribunus et notarius* in (probably) 395/6.[2]



Fig. 1. Stilicho diptych, Monza; original hinging: the panels should be reversed (photo Wikimedia).

1 C. Jullian, "Le diptyche de Stilicon au trésor de Monza," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 2 (1882) 5-35.

2 See the entry for Eucherius in *PLRE* II.404.

The most important and wide-ranging modern study, with excellent photographs, was published in 1982 by K. Shelton under the title "The diptych of the young office holder".[3] After reviewing almost every relevant issue in great detail and with great erudition, she dispatched her decision to withhold the standard date and identification in just three sentences, offering no documentation:

> [While] there is much to be learned concerning the female figure, there is no evidence in the diptych representation to place her in a ruling dynasty. She lacks the jeweled diadem recorded in the images of imperial women since the early fourth century and the diadem, chlamys, and fibula attested since the early fifth. If she is not imperial, he is not necessarily Stilicho and must revert to the anonymity of his military office.

I briefly rejected this conclusion in 1986,[4] and in 1989 B. Kiilerich and H. Torp came out with a detailed rebuttal, largely based on inconclusive art-historical arguments.[5] Since then, most scholars have continued to accept Jullian's identification,[6] though without answering Shelton's argument, which has been re-affirmed in 2015 by A. Christ:[7]

> If Serena, wife of Stilicho, mother of Eucherius, she should be shown as an imperial princess, the niece *and adopted daughter* of Theodosius. Since she lacks any specifically imperial attribute, she is not a member of the imperial house. Hence no Stilicho, no Eucherius, no date of 395/6.

It was my reading of this more emphatic formulation that prompted an objection that did not occur to me 30 years ago. There are two reasons why Serena would *not* be shown with either diadem or imperial *fibula*. In the first place, the jeweled diadem was the exclusive insigne of Augusti and Augustae.[8] Caesars, the junior members of the imperial college (such as the sons of Constantine in his lifetime, Gallus and Julian), even though they wear the purple, are named in the headings to imperial laws, and appear on the coinage, were permitted only plain band diadems.[9] When the Caesar Julian was proclaimed Augustus at Paris early in 360, he could not produce a diadem; eventually a soldier placed his neck-chain (*torques*) on the Caesar's head as "a symbol, however mean, of his elevation". A few months later he celebrated his *quinquennalia* "wearing a magnificent diadem set with gleaming jewels" (*ambitioso diademate utebatur, lapidum fulgore distincto*).[10] If not even Caesars were allowed the jeweled diadem, naturally the only imperial females so shown were those formally elevated to the rank of Augusta. This normally means wives of reigning emperors (though none between Constantine's mother Helena and wife Fausta and Flaccilla, the first wife of Theodosius I),[11] very occasionally sisters of emperors, the most

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3 K. J. Shelton, "The diptych of the young office holder," *JbAC* 25 (1982) 132-71.

4 "Pagan ivories," in F. Paschoud (ed.), *Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire* (Paris 1986) 58 n.59; see also my *Last pagans of Rome* (Oxford 2011) 734.

5 B. Kiilerich and H. Torp, "Hic est: hic Stilicho; the date and interpretation of a notable diptych," *JdI* 104 (1989) 319-71.

6 Most recently, H. Sivan, *Galla Placidia: the last Roman empress* (Oxford 2011) 9.

7 "The importance of being Stilicho: diptychs as genre," in G. Greatrex and H. Elton (edd.), *Shifting genres in late antiquity* (Farnham 2015) at 174 [my italics].

8 Much less is known about the imperial *fibula* with triple jeweled pendant, but the few examples (Theodosius I, Justinian, Theodora) are all shown on representations of Augusti or Augustae.

9 F. Kolb, *Herrscherideologie in der Spätantike* (Berlin 2001) 78-79, 95, 106-8 and 202-4.

10 Amm. Marc. 20.4.17-18; 21.1.4, with J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst and H. C. Teitler, *Philological and historical commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XX* (Groningen 1987) 94-99, citing the many other sources that mention the incident (99 for the *torques*).

11 On the representation of Flaccilla, see K. G. Holum, *Theodosian empresses* (Berkeley, CA 1982) 31-44. Not one of the wives of Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian, Valens or Gratian

famous example being Pulcheria, elder sister of Theodosius II. But Pulcheria had three other sisters (Flaccilla 2, Arcadia, Marina), not one of whom was granted the title Augusta. That this is more than an argument from silence is shown by the names of their palaces as given in a well-informed contemporary document dedicated to Theodosius II, the *Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae*:[12]

> domum nobilissimae Marinae; domum nobilissimae Arcadiae; domum Augustae Placidiae; domum Augustae Pulcheriae.[13]

We have no portraits of Arcadia and Marina, but presumably they would not have been shown with the diadem or imperial *fibula*.

The closest parallel to Serena in both time and place would be Galla Placidia, indisputably daughter of Theodosius I, but not proclaimed Augusta until after her marriage to Constantius III in 421, more than a decade after Serena's death.[14] Aelia Marcia Euphemia, daughter of Marcian, presumably did not become Augusta until her husband Anthemius became western emperor in 467. Two contemporary documents give Valentinian III's daughter Placidia the title *nobilissima femina*, though she too may have been proclaimed Augusta when her husband Olybrius became western emperor in 474.[15] The only 5th-c. imperial daughters proclaimed Augusta without marrying an emperor seem to be Pulcheria and Iusta Grata Honoria, daughter of Galla Placidia and Constantius and sister of Valentinian III, both after Serena's death.[16]

It would be interesting to know what (if any) distinctive dress or insignia imperial daughters and sisters not granted the rank of Augusta wore. But that would not be relevant to the case of Serena, because she was *not* an imperial daughter: she was not adopted by Theodosius I. Stilicho's ingenious panegyrist Claudian repeatedly does his best to imply that she was, which to those familiar with his methods should immediately arouse suspicion. At *Laus Serenae* (*LS*) 104, he claims that, upon the death of her father, Theodosius adopted (*adoptat*) his brother's orphaned daughter.[17] At *Epithalamium Honorii* 36, Theodosius is said to have bound Stilicho to him as his "son-in-law" (*generum*) with *fraterna prole*, overtranslated in Platnauer's Loeb edition as "his brother's *adopted* daughter"; cf. also *Cons. Stil*. i.71-73, *nataeque maritum … generum*. At *Cons. Stil*. iii.176-81, he describes his "royal mother" showing the baby Eucherius to his "grandfather" Theodosius, who dandled his "grandson" on his knee, with a vague reference to his glorious destiny:

> dedit haec exordia lucis
> Eucherio puerumque ferens hic [in Rome] *regia mater*
> Augusto monstravit *avo*; laetatus at ille
> *sustulit* in Tyria reptantem veste *nepotem*,
> Romaque venturi gaudebat praescia fati,
> quod te iam tanto meruisset pignore civem.

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is attested as Augustae. *The last statues of antiquity* database lists 46 items under the heading "Empresses", mostly inscribed bases and none unfortunately of any help here.

12 J. Matthews, "The *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*," in L. Grig and G. Kelly, *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in late antiquity* (Oxford 2012) 81-115.

13 O. Seeck, *Notitia Dignitatum* (Berlin 1876) 229-43: II.12, VIII.7, XI.11-12, XII.9.

14 *PLRE* II.889.

15 *Coll. Avellana* no. 62, p. 139.18; Victor of Vita, *Hist. Pers. Afr*. 2.3; *PLRE* II.887.

16 *PLRE* II.568.

17 For text, Italian translation and commentary on this poem, see F. E. Consolino, *Claudiano: elogio di Serena* (Venice 1986).

> Here [in Rome, during Theodosius's visit of 389] Eucherius first beheld the light, here his royal mother showed the babe to his imperial grandsire, who rejoiced to lift up a grandson upon his knee and let him crawl upon his purple robe. Rome had foreknowledge of his destined glory and was glad, for so dear a pledge would keep you ever her faithful citizen (transl. Platnauer, adapted).

Most critics have assumed that Claudian was simply reporting well-known facts. But while it would be natural enough for Theodosius (still a private citizen when his brother died) to bring up his orphaned niece in his own household (for all we know, her mother may also have been dead), that need not mean that he formally adopted her. The term *adoptat* used by Claudian does not have to be given its full legal sense.[18] And it is surely most unlikely that, once he was emperor, he would, as implied by Claudian's subtle use of the technical term *sustulit*,[19] formally acknowledge her son as his grandson and so a potential heir to the throne. He had two sons whom he naturally expected to produce grandsons of his own to continue the dynasty. The panegyric of Pacatus, delivered during this very Roman visit of 389, made it clear that even then he saw his two sons as his successors, to the exclusion of even his much younger senior co-ruler Valentinian II, providentially removed by death in 392.

He no doubt loved Serena, and he certainly admired and relied on Stilicho, but he cannot have been so unwise as to introduce such a complication into his long-established plans for the succession.[20] Yet several passages of Claudian imply that he did. In 398, Stilicho married his (probably still underage) daughter Maria to Honorius. On the eve of the wedding, Claudian wrote (*Fesc. Hon*. iii.8-9):

> gener Augusti pridem fueras,
> nunc rursus eris socer Augusti.
>
> You have long been an emperor's [i. e. Theodosius's] son-in-law,
> now in turn you will be an emperor's [i.e., Honorius's] father-in-law.

Cons. Stil. ii.339-61 describes Stilicho's hoped-for grandson by Honorius and Maria as a "grandson born to rule" (*recturo ... nepoti*), and then hints at a future marriage between Eucherius and a *nurus*, who can only be Theodosius's daughter Galla Placidia. According to Zosimus (5.32.1), after Stilicho's death it was rumored that he had been planning to make Eucherius emperor of the East in place of the infant Theodosius II. That is unlikely, but these and other passages of Claudian certainly suggest that Stilicho did have dynastic plans for his son.[21]

Let us set Claudian on one side for the moment and look more closely at our other sources. Zosimus refers to Serena's parentage no fewer than three times. At 4.57.2 he describes her as "daughter of a brother of the emperor Theodosius"; at 5.4.1, "daughter of Honorius, who was a brother of Theodosius"; and at 5.34.6 he describes Stilicho as "married to a niece" (ἀδελφιδῆς) of Theodosius.[22] That is true as far as it goes, but adoption

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18 *Adoptare* is often used loosely, even metaphorically: *TLL* I.810-11.

19 "To pick up (a new-born child) ... in the process of formal recognition": *OLD s.v. Tollo* 2.

20 The same objection applies to the identification of one of the figures in the royal box of the SE face of the Theodosian obelisk base at Constantinople as Eucherius (bibliography in B. Kiilerich, *Late fourth century classicism in the plastic arts* [Odense 1993] 40).

21 A. Cameron, *Claudian: poetry and propaganda at the court of Honorius* (Oxford 1970) 46-49, though I no longer accept Delbrueck's claim to detect a representation of his sister Maria on the diptych.

22 Actually he says "a niece of the elder Theodosius", but he must mean the emperor Theodosius, not his homonymous father.

by Theodosius would have made her a full member of the imperial family. Why would Zosimus not have given her correct status? It might be added that Serena had an elder sister, Thermantia (*LS* 118), and Theodosius installed both sisters at court once he became emperor (*LS* 113-14). His elevation naturally improved their marriage prospects, and Thermantia too married a general (*nupsit et illa duci, LS* 187). It is unlikely that Theodosius would adopt only one of the sisters, and there is certainly no evidence (nor has anyone suggested) that he adopted Thermantia.

It is important to distinguish texts relating to Serena from texts relating to Stilicho; and also to distinguish literary from official texts. Serena had lived at the court of Theodosius for many years and, even if not legally their sister, must have been on intimate terms with Arcadius, Honorius and Galla Placidia. Though never accorded the title Augusta or featured on the coinage, in practice she no doubt both behaved and was treated like a princess.[23] Claudian was not alone in styling her *regina* (*LS* 5; *carmina minora* 46.14). In the Greek *Life of Melania* (50 and 55), she is styled βασίλισσα, according to V. A. Sirago translating the Latin "Augusta", which he concedes is being used here informally.[24] But by the 4th c. the Greek for Augustus and Augusta was Αὔγουστος and Αὔγουστα,[25] nor would anyone ever have used the title Augusta "informally". The Latin *Life of Melania* offers not *Augusta* but *regina*, obviously an unofficial term in the Roman political lexicon. Just as βασιλεύς was never the official style of the emperor before the 7th c., so βασίλισσα was an unofficial, courtesy title both for Augustae and for what we would nowadays call "minor royals". The *Life of Melania* 50 and 55 styles Eudoxia, daughter of Theodosius II, βασίλισσα before she was proclaimed Augusta in 439, two years after her marriage to Valentinian III (*PLRE* ii.411). As late as the 12th c., Anna Comnena, daughter of Alexius I Comnenos, who to her great frustration never became an empress, was regularly styled βασίλισσα.[26]

Nor is Claudian alone in calling Arcadius and Honorius her brothers (*carmina minora* 48.1; 48.12). In a dedication commemorating the translation of the newly-discovered martyr Nazarius to the Basilica Apostolorum in Milan, Serena is described as decorating the shrine with Libyan marble "for her brothers and children" (*germanisque suis, pignoribus propriis*).[27] In the *Life of Melania* 12, she is represented as referring to Honorius as her brother. In personal and informal communications she no doubt addressed Arcadius and Honorius as *fratres* and Theodosius as *pater*, but it would have been another matter entirely to style herself *filia Theodosii Augusti* in a formal, public dedication (or for Stilicho to style himself *gener Augusti* in a formal dedication).

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23 As S. Mazzarino put it, she lived with Theodosius "come una figlia di lui, anche se non esisteva un'adozione in quello senso iuridico": *Serena e le due Eudossie* (Rome 1946) 6.

24 V. A. Sirago, "Funzioni di Serena nella *Vita Melaniae*," *VetChr* 22 (1985) 381-86; so too S. I. Oost, *Galla Placidia Augusta* (Chicago, IL 1968) 74: "technically incorrect".

25 H. J. Mason, *Greek terms for Roman institutions* (Toronto 1974) 9 and 119-21; G. Rösch, *Onoma Basileias*: *Studien zum offiziellen Gebrauch der Kaisertitel in spätantiker und frühbyzantinischer Zeit* (Vienna 1978) 34-39.

26 J. Darrouzès, *Georges et Démétrios Tornikès: lettres et discours* (Paris 1970) p. 223.19 and n.5. In "La titulature de l'impératrice et sa signification: recherches sur les sources byzantines de la fin du VIIIè à la fin du XIIè siècle," *Byzantion* 46 (1976) 243-91, E. Bensammar collects a mass of texts showing that βασίλισσα is much commoner in literary texts, and often unofficial.

27 *ILCV* 1801.8; N. B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: church and court in a Christian capital* (Berkeley, CA 1994) 363-64. Strictly, *germanus* means a full (not half- or step-)brother, *pignus* in this sense is poetical, and no names are given, so the dedication falls well short of an explicit formal statement.

That Theodosius did *not* formally adopt Serena is, I think, proved by the dedications to two statues of Stilicho. On the first, erected in 398/9, shortly after the wedding of Maria and Honorius,[28] Stilicho is styled the *socer* of Honorius, but *not* (as Claudian so insistently claimed) the *gener* of Theodosius, only the *progener* of the elder Theodosius, the emperor's father. Now, *progener* is a rare term, only ever used very precisely in its technical sense to identify the grandfather of a man's wife.[29] The reason Stilicho lays claim to this rather remote, *non-imperial* connection, is because he could *not* himself claim to be the *gener* of the emperor; the most he can offer is two vague formulas, *ad columen ... regiae adfinitatis evectus* and *in adfinitatem regiam cooptatus*. Then there is the dedication to a monument erected 6 or 7 years later, in or soon after 405.[30] Once again, Stilicho is described as the *socer* of Honorius but not the *gener* of Theodosius, nothing closer than his *adfinis,* supplemented by the same vague formula *ad columen regiae adfinitatis advectus.* No one expected a panegyrist, especially a poet, to be careful and precise in his terminology; but a formal cursus set up on a public monument was another matter, and in such a document Stilicho could not afford to make an explicit claim that would immediately be recognized as false.

If Serena had been acknowledged as Theodosius's adoptive daughter, she might have prevailed on the submissive Honorius to proclaim her Augusta, perhaps citing such remote parallels as Trajan's sister Marciana and niece Matidia. But she was not adopted, and so could not claim to be a full member of the imperial house. The fact that she behaved like a princess does not mean that she would have gone so far as to wear insignia to which she was not entitled. Shelton's objection to identifying her as the Monza female fails. That is just as well, because it is not easy to come up with any other plausible identification for the three figures.

Constantius, *magister militiae* and *patricius* from 415 to 421, married Galla Placidia in 417. But after the marriage Placidia was proclaimed Augusta and thus should have been portrayed with full imperial insignia.[31] In any case, Constantius died only two years after the birth of the future Valentinian III in 419.[32] Shelton rather half-heartedly canvassed the little-known Fl. Felix *cos*. 428, like Stilicho generalissimo of the western armies (from 425 to 430). As it happens, we do know his wife's name (Padusia), not because she was an important person in her own right but because Aetius had her killed together with her husband in 430. Yet the Monza female must be a lady of high rank in her own right.

Presentation diptychs

Consideration of the function of the diptych will help establish its honorands. It falls into the fairly wide category of presentation diptychs which I have discussed recently in some detail.[33] The majority of those that survive commemorate consulships, but we have a few issued by other officials. The most relevant for our purpose are those (unfortunately not preserved) that Symmachus *cos*. 391 issued for both the quaestorian and praetorian games of his son Memmius Symmachus, the quaestorian games occurring when Memmius was only 10 years old. It is clear from several references in his letters that Symmachus himself

28 *CIL* VI 1730 = *ILS* 1277, with commentary in *CIL* VI.8.3 p. 4746.
29 *TLL* X.2, 1355.
30 *CIL* VI 17311 = *ILS* 1278, with commentary in *CIL* VI.8.3, p. 4746.
31 *PLRE* II.889.
32 *PLRE* II.321-25.
33 A. Cameron, "The origin, context and function of consular diptychs," *JRS* 103 (2013) 174-207, and "City personifications and consular diptychs," *JRS* 105 (2015) 250-87.



Fig. 2. Missorium of Aspar (photo Art Resource).

organized both the games and the distribution of the diptychs on Memius's behalf. A recently published fragment of a glass plate inscribed *Symmachus consul o*[*rdinarius*] shows a hand in ornate costume holding a *mappa* and, beneath, the head of a small boy, presumably a copy of a silver *missorium* commemorating the quaestorian games of the younger Symmachus. The closest surviving parallel is the Aspar *missorium*, a silver plate on which Aspar *cos.* 434 is represented as consul holding up a *mappa* beside his small son Ardabur, labelled *praetor*, also holding up a *mappa* (fig. 2). The Lampadiorum panel and the Liverpool *venatio* diptych both show young men presiding at games from a loge, in both cases flanked by older men, surely older kinsmen who paid for and organized the younger man's praetorian games.[34] A well-known extract from the history of Olympiodorus describes the extravagant games provided by three prominent Roman aristocrats in the name of their sons to introduce them to public life.

There are clear general similarities between the Monza diptych and this group of pieces. As on the Aspar *missorium* and probably on Memmius Symmachus's quaestorian diptychs, the honorand is a small boy,[35] not more than 10 years old, shown with his distinguished father. One difference is that all the diptychs and *missoria* listed in the preceding paragraph were issued to commemorate the provision of (usually praetorian) games by young aristocrats at their first appearance in public life. Nothing in the iconography of the Monza diptych suggests that it was intended to commemorate public games. The office Eucherius held (as we know from Zosimus) was that of tribune and notary, often awarded as an honorary title (as, in an exactly contemporary example, to the poet Claudian).[36]

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34 See my *Last pagans* (supra n.4) 730-35; for a splendid photograph of the Liverpool panel, see M. Gibson, *The Liverpool ivories* (London 1994) 16, pl. VIIA; for the glass plate, see Cameron (supra n.33) 280, fig. 16.

35 For this interpretation of the Aspar *missorium*, see Cameron ibid. 275-80 with fig. 25.

36 See *PLRE* II *s.v.* Eucherius 1, Claudianus 5, Palladius 2.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the Monza diptych is essentially the same: to commemorate the introduction of a young man with a promising future to public life by distinguished parents. The key difference is that only here do we find the mother represented as well as the father. The representation in such a context of a female who is not an empress has hardly received appropriate attention. She must be more than simply the wife of the general represented on the other leaf of the diptych, however important he was: she must have been important in her own right. In addition, she is shown in the guise of Spes: it is not just the rose[37] she holds up in her right hand, but the manner in which she clutches a gathering of drapery in her left. In the first three centuries of the empire Spes is regularly shown on coins commemorating the elevation of some junior member of the imperial family as she holds up a rose in her right hand and lifts up her skirt with her left.[38] The female figure with the rose, found on the coinage for the sons of Constantine, disappears in the course of the 4th c., but the concept of Spes promoting a future or recently-elevated Augustus still appears occasionally.[39] The closest parallel to the Monza diptych is a *solidus* issued at Antioch in 367 when Gratian was proclaimed Augustus (at the age of 7 years), showing two standing emperors, the brothers Valentinian and Valens, and a diminutive togate figure between them beneath the legend *SPE-S R[ei] P[ublicae]*.[40]

The Monza female holds up a rose in her right hand and clutches a gathering of drapery in her left. Above all, between the couple there is a child whom we are obviously meant to see as their son and heir. There are examples of ordinary citizens employing the imperial imagery of apotheosis on private funerary monuments,[41] but I know of no case of a private couple using the imagery of Spes to promote their heir. Anyone sophisticated enough to recognize this (by the 390s rather old-fashioned) imagery in the stance of the Monza female could not fail to be aware of its long-established imperial associations. In view of the unparalleled presence of a high-status female and Stilicho's open parading of his dynastic plans, it is difficult to entertain the possibility of any identification of the three honorands other than as Serena, Stilicho and Eucherius. Indeed, the Monza diptych is itself concrete evidence of these dynastic plans. Who but Stilicho would have dared to employ imperial imagery to promote his son?

If so, then the diptych can be dated fairly precisely. We know that Eucherius was born in 389, and the boy on the diptych cannot be more than 10 years old. In addition, two imperial busts are clearly depicted on Stilicho's shield, both draped in the *trabea*, one larger than the other. This denotes a year when both emperors were consuls, one of whom was younger than about 15 years old.[42] There were two imperial consuls in 396 (when Honorius was aged 10), 402 (when Honorius was aged 18), and 407 (when Honorius was aged 23 and Theodosius II aged 6). The size of the boy on the diptych suits the 7-year-old Eucherius in 396 better than a 13-year-old in 402 or an 18-year-old in 407. The Monza ivory is thus the earliest-known late-antique presentation diptych.

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37 Or at any rate a flower traditionally identified as a rose.

38 For a selection of illustrations, see R. A. G. Carson, *Principal coins of the Romans* II (London 1980) nos. 394, 483, 680, 952, 1056, 863, 1040.

39 Shelton (supra n.3) especially 164-66.

40 *RIC* IX (1953) 277 no. 20, pl. XIII.5.

41 Cameron (supra n.4) 726-27.

42 On the question of the age at which boy emperors began to be represented full size, see Cameron ibid. 734 and *JRS* 105 (2015) 260.